



AUSTRALIAN
COUNCIL
FOR
INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

PRINCIPLES

FOR ETHICAL RESEARCH AND EVALUATION IN DEVELOPMENT

Endorsed by the ACFID Executive Committee:
26 June 2013



This document is intended to promote and support improved development practice in the areas of research and evaluation, to raise awareness, and to assist in the identification of ethical issues so that well-considered decisions can be made and justified. Ethical principles are considered most important as ethical practice in research and evaluation relies on active self-reflection, discretion, judgement and appreciation of context.

This document was prepared by the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID), in consultation with its member organisations and academic partners. It was developed to assist ACFID members and is aligned with the ACFID Code of Conduct.¹ In particular, the principles proposed here have been developed in line with the values that underpin the work of ACFID members in aid and development represented in this Code of Conduct.²

The principles outlined here are based on and extend existing internationally recognised ethical research principles and guidance for data collection with human participants. The extensions include an emphasis on cross-cultural elements, power relations, capacity building and understanding the ‘development’ imperative within research practice conducted with and through non-governmental organisations.

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|-----|--|----|---------------------|
| I | <i>Respect For Human Beings;</i> | II | <i>Beneficence;</i> |
| III | <i>Research Merit And Integrity and;</i> | IV | <i>Justice.</i> |

While this document only presents principles, ACFID acknowledges the existing body of experience and guidance around how these principles may be operationalized. Such guidance to assist with this understanding will be elaborated and offered through ongoing updates under the ACFID Code of Conduct Implementation Guidance. The guidance will incorporate the principles outlined here while offering advice on obtaining informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, assessing, minimising and managing risks as well as guidance on how to support ethical research practice with particular vulnerable groups including children, people living with a disability etc. This guidance is expected to be updated on an annual basis through consultation with ACFID members.

¹ ACFID's Code of Conduct states that signatory organisations are obliged to: "ensure they [local people] have opportunity to authentically contribute to [...] monitoring and evaluation" (Principle B.1.1); "ensure they have analysed and understood the context in which planned activities will occur" (B.1.2); take an advocacy role from an "evidence based position and [...] include the perspectives of those affected" (B.4.1). Hence the need to consider a minimum of ethical standards required for research and evaluation.

² ACFID member agencies are diverse in their particular approach to aid and development however; the ACFID Code of Conduct is informed by eight values that are shared by all agencies. ACFID Code of Conduct (2010), Preamble pg. 1. ACFID members as signatories to the ACFID Code of Conduct, commit themselves to upholding these values in all their aid and development activities.

Applicability and coverage

This document is intended to be *adopted* or *adapted* to the work conducted by ACFID members. Ethical standards are to be considered by those who commission, manage, conduct or review research and evaluation, particularly in relation to poverty reduction, development and social justice. In this document research is defined as: “*an original investigation undertaken to gain knowledge, understanding and insight*”³ and this document focuses specifically on applied research that involves human participants. Evaluation is therefore included within the scope of this document due to similarities in the ethical issues raised in practice⁴ and the reasons cited below.

Evaluation is a type of applied research commonly undertaken by development agencies for the “*systematic, objective assessment of an ongoing or completed project, program or policy.*”⁵ The ethical considerations for evaluations (that involve human participants) are the same as for other kinds of research. Ethical principles for evaluation in the development sector are pertinent for a number of reasons:

- Many evaluations present ethical issues, including serious risk of harm to participants. Evaluations also have strong ethical implications as they are often connected with policy and programming decisions that affect the lives of either participants or other populations. This increases the power differentials between evaluator (and/or commissioner and/or funder) and participants.
- Evaluations operate at the nexus of multiple stakeholder interests. These interests exert influence on evaluation foci and process, which in turn may constrain or reduce the priority given to participants’ perspective.
- There is currently no broadly adopted framework that governs quality of evaluation in the sector.⁶

From here-on the term ‘research’ will be used to encompass both research and evaluation, and ‘researchers’ to also encompass ‘evaluators’. The principles provided in this document should inform all stages of a research process - including commissioning, design, planning, implementation, analysis, dissemination and use.

³ Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research, NHMRC, 2007

⁴ The Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the OECD and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) apply principles for ethical conduct in both research and evaluation due to similarities in methodologies and practice.

⁵ Development Assistance Committee (DAC) definition.

⁶ Some evaluations are undertaken by professional evaluators, whose practice is expected to be aligned with professional and ethical guidelines or codes of conduct. For example,

the Australasian Society of Evaluators maintain a Code of Ethics and Guidelines for the Ethical Conduct of Evaluations. Internationally, the DAC guidance specify principles of integrity, honesty, respect for human rights and differences in culture and customs, and mindfulness of gender roles, ethnicity, ability, age, language and other differences. These Principles have sought to draw from and build on these professional standards.

Ethics in development research and evaluation

Research conducted in developing countries and particularly in relation to development practice raises distinct ethical, moral and political issues and dilemmas. These arise due to current and historical disparities in wealth, power, access to information, political interest, and status. The potential for trust and power imbalances between researchers and participants is heightened (particularly when research is linked to aid policy and program decisions) and unintended negative consequences are a potential outcome. For instance it is possible to reinforce existing unjust social relationships, to generate conflict or to put participants at risk. Beyond this, when researchers originate from countries other than that in which research takes place, complex cross-cultural issues arise. Differences in culture, norms and values create challenges for both researcher and participants that must be carefully negotiated.

Basis

The principles presented in this document build upon the ACFID Code of Conduct, which exists to assist ACFID members “to observe the highest ethical standards in all their activities”. It complements and extends the Code in relation to research and evaluation practice by drawing on relevant national and international standards applicable to this area of work. This includes, the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2007), National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) and ‘Values and Ethics: Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Research’ (2003). These documents specify the standards expected in the responsible conduct of research in Australia, and are aligned with international agreements such as the Declaration of Helsinki⁷ and international human rights instruments. Beyond these sources, this document also draws on literature on ethics in cross-cultural research, professional codes for evaluation and ethical guidelines for research or evaluation developed by Australian aid and development non-governmental agencies working in developing countries.





⁷ World Medical Association (WMA) Declaration of Helsinki, adopted by WMA General Assembly, June 1964



PRINCIPLES

FOR ETHICAL RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

Fundamentally, ethical research principles are about the relationship between researchers (those who conduct, fund and commission research) and research participants. The following principles give practical expression to the values underscored in the ACFID Code of Conduct and four core values underpinning ethical research and evaluation:⁸

-  *Respect for Human Beings;*
-  *Beneficence;*
-  *Research Merit and Integrity and;*
-  *Justice.*

⁸ These four core values are drawn from the National Statement (2007), based on six decades of research ethics.

I *Respect for Human Beings*

Respect is an overarching consideration and represents recognition of each human being's intrinsic value. As such, making opportunity for human beings to exercise autonomy and make their own decisions is paramount, as is a commitment to participant welfare over and above research goals. Respect requires prior knowledge of and due regard for the culture, values, customs, beliefs and practices, both individual and collective, of those involved in research. It also requires mindfulness of differences in values and culture between researchers and participants, thus avoiding 'difference blindness' which can undermine both trustful relationships as well as research integrity. Respect involves honouring the rights, privacy, dignity, entitlements and diversity of those contributing to research. Informed consent is fundamental to upholding the principle of respect, in giving a research participant the choice to voluntarily participate in the research process. Informed consent means a participant is given clear information about the research, is able to choose not to participate and is able to withdraw at any time, without consequence (any limits to this right should be explained).

II *Beneficence*

Beneficence is action that is done for the benefit of others. This principle implies that the expected benefit to participants or the wider community justifies any risks of harm or discomfort to participants. To fulfil this principle research must be of value to participants, their community, country or development practice more broadly, be designed to minimise risks and participants must be duly informed of potential benefits and risks of the research. In a development context, the research process itself should be viewed as an 'intervention', with its own impacts and consequences, and as such, should carry a commitment to support empowerment and participation.

Beyond beneficence, the concept of "do no harm" (non-maleficence) is also critical, particularly in fragile states. There are many types of harm that require anticipation and consideration. Harm can be immediate or long-term and can be physical, social, emotional or psychological. Harm may pertain to the welfare and security of an individual, institution or group. Examples include discomfort, embarrassment, intrusion, devaluation of worth, unmet expectations, distress and trauma. Political and social factors may also jeopardise the safety of participants before, during or after research. To 'do no harm' means such risks and harm are anticipated, planned for, and used to seriously question proceeding with proposed research. Beyond harm to participants, this principle also requires consideration of potential harm to researchers themselves, particularly in terms of safety, potential trauma, culture shock and availability of emotional support.



Research Merit and Integrity

Research deemed to have merit is well-justified, meets relevant quality criteria and is conducted by persons or teams with sufficient experience and competence. Justification of research relates to its potential benefit in the form of new knowledge or improved social welfare or individual well-being. Meeting relevant quality criteria means that the research demonstrates alignment between the aims, questions, methodology and methods and these are appropriate to the research context, including its culture and values and taking into account intercultural difference.⁹ Beyond the relevant research skills, a competent research team requires as a minimum foundational knowledge of the culture, political situation, history and values in the relevant country and local context. Inclusion of adequately experienced local researchers with appropriate language and cultural understanding may improve research integrity and offer opportunity to build research capacity in developing countries.

Research *integrity* is secured by researcher (and research funder or commissioner) commitment to genuine search for knowledge and understanding, following recognised principles of honest research conduct. This commitment is particularly important in development work, as development organisations may have vested interests in particular research findings that may or may not align with actual findings. Integrity also encompasses dissemination and communication of results not only to research participants but more broadly, in ways that permit scrutiny and contribute to knowledge, and that preserve and protect the trust participants place in researchers.¹⁰



Justice

This principle is generally described in relation to equity: a fair process for recruitment of research participants; no unfair burden of participation on particular groups; and fair distribution of and access to the benefits of participation in research. Justice also takes in the recognition that there should be no exploitation of participants in the conduct of research, and instead, active protection of participant wellbeing. In developing countries this principle involves treating all participants with dignity, regardless of gender, age, race, ethnicity, ability, religion and culture, and requires researcher cognisance of existing power relations, so that broader principles of human rights and addressing injustice can be upheld. It also involves ensuring that all relevant social groups are actively included in research and that attempts are made to avoid further marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion of under-represented social groups. Finally, justice requires make findings accessible to participants in a timely, clear manner in a format that is meaningful for participants.

⁹ ACFID Code of Conduct (B.1.2) obliges signatories to “ensure that they have analysed and understood the context in which planned activities will occur and will continue to review their understanding as the context changes”. In terms of research and evaluation, this obligation should be observed not only by the organisation conducting the activity, but also by donors and participating researchers.

¹⁰ The ACFID Code of Conduct (C.3.2) obliges member fundraising materials to “avoid material omissions, exaggerations of fact, misleading visual portrayals (...)” and (C.1.1) that organisations are “committed to accurate and transparent communication with their stakeholders”.



united against poverty

The Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) unites Australia's non-government aid and development organisations to strengthen their collective impact against poverty.

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